

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Goodall, Deborah (1998) Research activities and UK public libraries: past imperfect future tense? *Library Management*, 19 (8). pp. 459-468. ISSN 0143-5124

Published by: Emerald

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01435129810239958>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01435129810239958>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/620/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE



**UniversityLibrary**

# Research activities and UK public libraries: past imperfect, future tense?

---

*Deborah Goodall*

## Introduction

Recent reports on the public library scene illustrate how the historical situation (Pluse and Prytherch, 1996) of fragmented, localised, low-key research activity is being replaced by a more coherent and driven approach with clearer co-ordination, direction and funding at national level (Library and Information Commission Research Committee, 1997; Society of Chief Librarians Public Libraries Research Group, 1997). However, other studies (Goodall, 1996; Goodall, 1997) have shown that research methods and research skills remain undeveloped in the public library service as a whole. As local government moves from an administrative or managerial model of service provision to a business or networked model of activities in support of strategic policy objectives, more attention will need to be given to research in order to address the "wicked issues" (Stewart, 1994) which are the priorities of local and central government today. As part of the work undertaken for a PhD thesis the contemporary practice of research in one statutory area of service, the public library service, has been examined in order to enrich our understanding of the relationship between research, as carried out by practitioner-researchers, and policy and strategy in local government.

This article investigates current research activities in public library services drawing from a series of interviews which took place between May and July 1997 with chief librarians or their equivalents in a sample of 20 local authorities in the West Midlands and North-East regions of England[1]. The analysis explores factors such as the purpose of research, the role of corporate strategy and the limitations imposed by lack of suitably trained staff, support and funding. Of particular concern is the evidence that research activity and method is largely confined to "simpler" issues of operational service development and does not extend to "harder" questions of research addressing the social and economic impact of the service.

## What did the managers mean by public library research?

Overall the research activities discussed during the interviews tended to reflect current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations. The three main areas of interest were users, service delivery and IT applications. Typical examples of research activities are, respectively, surveys of non-users (17), lapsed-users (11), survey to inform new library building (16); unobtrusive testing of the delivery of information services (17), reviews of School Library Services (5, 9, 16), library closures (18), library opening hours (18), monitoring use of public access Internet sites (17), specification for new computer system (9). The majority of the projects described were carried out in-house and within the individual local authority. There were fewer examples of externally funded or joint research activities.

## Where does this phenomenon happen?

Each public library service was provided by a local authority for use by the general public. There were obvious differences between the library services in terms of position within the authority's structure, funding, staffing and so on. However there were also cultural differences in terms of how "research-friendly" they were. Articulating the *local authority's corporate culture* was difficult for the managers. Often managers described the corporate ethos in terms of "accountability" (7). Five managers spoke more confidently about the research approach in their authorities. For example, one said "it is pretty well embedded in all of our Department ..." (17); another described how research was "very central" to the authority and that "we are acutely aware that in making decisions about what sort of authority we are, what we are about ..." (7).

Those managers who were able to identify a clear guiding *corporate approach to research activity* were almost always involved in research activities themselves. Indeed an indication of the bigger contribution that libraries can make to the local authority can often be found in the corporate plan. Corporate strategy was commonly expressed in documents identifying key objectives (1, 10) or frameworks such as regeneration (2, 17) or anti-poverty (9, 12, 13) to which every department was supposed to contribute:

There's a corporate plan ... the principles are concerned with consultation, involvement, equality of access, participation. We've our own set of aims and values to add to that too ... but the structure of the corporate plan is used to shape our own development plan because it does demonstrate that we, as a library service, are supporting the council's strategies (19).

Other library services were operating in less fortunate circumstances:

There is no corporate plan or corporate information system here ... we actually know of parallel activities going on and people being surveyed one week on one instance and the next week on something that is almost exactly the same (15).

## Why does research happen within library services?

While managers did not speak of an impetus for research as such it was clear that for some there were driving forces which had initiated the research approach within the library service. Some factors were internal to the library service and/or the local authority, others were external. "Finding out what the market place wants" (1) and checking "whether you are providing best value for money" (5) and "targeting resources" (5) in order to cope with budget reductions and inform members of the options (3) were the driving forces in three authorities.

Restructuring was the key factor in two library services (10, 17) and the introduction of a new authority-wide approach based on working in partnership with other departments, organisations and local people (20) was the key development in another. All managers from new unitary authorities were aware of the use that they could make of research even if the structures to enable it to happen were not yet in place. In other, more established local authorities, it was simply opportunism that initiated some research activities (8, 15, 19).

## Purpose of research activities

Research activities were carried out for several reasons but an overarching purpose was that of accountability, be it to customers, politicians, funders. Time and time again managers pointed out how "it is increasingly important to be able to build within your argument bodies of evidence which demonstrate need" (19). Library managers described research to



justify the library service (3), identify priorities (5), and to argue its case (12). Research then was very practical: "we're not here to improve our image, we're here to improve the service" (13). Dealing with budget cuts, or to use one library service's euphemism, income generation activities, and consequent reductions in service (1, 3, 12, 16) meant that some research "was all done from the aspect of 'how can we save money', not 'how can we offer a better service'" (3). One manager reflected: ... assessing the effectiveness of the integrated library system was a major piece of work and resulted in a large report to committee which contained a lot of interesting information ... but it's main purpose was to demonstrate to the committee that there was no staff saving that they could take off the department ... (12).

A number of other, more positive, stimuli can also be identified, such as developing business plans (1, 16). Although not stated explicitly, the need for research to underpin bids for external funding was evident in some of the descriptions of research activity. The presence of "the Charter approach" (2, 16, 17) and the use of performance indicators (10, 15, 16) set the tone for some library services. Four managers (8, 10, 11, 15), cited quality procedures as a reason for doing research. Collecting statistical data for CIPFA was considered as research by some library services (2, 5), especially where such data are not easily obtainable from the computer system.

Given the drive for accountability it is not surprising that the most common form of research activity involved obtaining feedback from users. Consultation was "part of our ethos" for one manager and was viewed as "an ongoing process in terms of getting feedback to inform our decision-making" and thus important "whenever we have a new development in the offing" (6, 17, 19). This was especially so for the manager who was "keen to find out what exactly is it that the people of this unitary authority want, not what was appropriate to the people of the county a few years back ... " (9). One manager gave an interesting example describing how external funding had been obtained where "the council said, and this was one of the key areas that convinced the Government to give money, that it would involve the community in spending the money" (19).

Several managers took on board customer comments through complaints and comments systems (9, 16) and also through consultation

with specific user groups, such as users of the School Library Service (5, 9, 16). Some of this consultation was undoubtedly driven by the pressure of competition, for example, delegating to schools the budget for the schools library service becomes a spur to market research into the real needs of schools. Some of this consultation too came about through the integration of library services into broader directorates, for example, (17), where there is already a culture of market research in order to achieve success in delivering business and service objectives.

### **What makes research activity happen?**

There are some intangible aspects of developing research activity. At the start of each interview managers were asked to recall their thoughts on being asked to participate in the study. There were some candid responses which did not always give a positive view of research such as "research is not the main function of the public library service" (8). One manager offered the explanation that " ... if something is research it has an academic background which may be of very limited use to what we do at the sharp end" (16). Others declared it was a "good thing" even though they felt they were not involved in research activities: "... it's something we should be doing but we don't do very well, we should do more but it's difficult ..." (3). Another commented "it's one of those topics that everyone talks about and doesn't do anything about, or don't realise that they are doing it in the first place" (7).

Nevertheless during the course of the interviews managers often inferred the importance of doing research. However when asked, is there a value placed on research within the local authority, their comments were quite cautious. Some managers qualified their responses saying "there certainly is in term of intent" (16) or clarified their answer in their terms: "it's valuable that we are able to demonstrate how we are supporting the priorities of the council in terms of community development, regeneration" (19). One manager spoke of a dichotomy: "... there's a recognition that long-term research, not directed by force of circumstances, is valuable" whilst noting that "there's also research that is more pragmatically based, that's reacting to circumstances, or is necessary to continue practical management" (12). Only one



manager gave a resounding “no” (15) in response to the question.

Values need to be articulated to enable action and evidence for this articulation can be found in the prevailing, for want of a better phrase, management style. This link was clearly set out in (7, 8, 10, 11), for example:

... we have the leadership from the city council as a whole, and that sets out priorities for us ... That is the strategic context ... The Director and Central Library Manager have the vision to interlink them all and give strategic leadership. The rest of us contribute at different points in terms of supporting that work but that structure helps me see what the priorities are, and it helps me influence my managers to make choices (and) choose priorities (10).

### Developing a research strategy

A number of topics were discussed which illuminate the development of a research strategy. First it was necessary to resolve the definition of research activities. Research was a “grand term” (17) to some managers (8, 9): “it sounds a bit academic and highbrow for what we actually do ... we gather management information and interpret it” (11). To others it lacked clarity: “really it’s separating out those of our activities that we can distinguish as research” because “we do quite a bit of analysing data and information gathering usually in response to specific situations that arise” (12). Some felt that while they did do research it was not research in the academic sense (6, 8). It was difficult to tease out what was meant by “academic research”; such an activity appeared to be specific and complex (5, 14), unlike “real life” research which “isn’t very academic, it’s applied ...” (12).

For many managers the activities that made up research were simply part of day-to-day management: “I see it almost as gathering information in order to assist in decision-making processes ...” (6). Some managers defined research in terms of marketing, targeting services and monitoring (5); others cited consultation activities (6, 8). Research was “practical, focused” (18): “... most of our research is reacting to situations and is done pragmatically to aid management in the department” (12).

Having a management strategy for library services was recognised as crucial in enabling a research strategy. Several managers, through no fault of their own, were struggling to work without a clear guiding strategy (3, 8). There

were examples of more structured approaches where library services had corporate guidance (10, 17), for example: “we have the key activities areas which give our main objectives ...” (13) and another drew from a district cultural centres strategy “linked to the wider council picture” (19). One manager gave a lucid description of the “strategic context” for any research activity, commencing with “local governing party policies” which were used by the council to “produce a policy framework document” which “sets key objectives” to which everyone is expected to contribute. Each committee then produces its own objectives under those headings so that, finally, “my individual unit plans are under those four headings ...” This manager added:

It’s very important to have that context, you can’t do research for its own sake. If it isn’t in context then it doesn’t have a service development benefit or an organisational benefit (10).

The management of research activities within the library services varied, from “producing project and task groups” (15), or delegating to the head of the appropriate service (14), or “a small headquarters staff” who acted “fairly informally and pragmatically” (12). Some managers had no organised approach (3) or relied on professional judgement for managing research:

We don’t have a 40 page document called the service development strategy but that’s where I have to use my judgement as the Director ... to assess whether or not a project seems worth pursuing, bearing in mind what I know about what the committee has been happy with in the past, or ... what I think is important to pursue in strategic terms for us as a library service (8).

### Funding

As much research was carried out internally often there was not a need to apply for funding but some managers had introduced the bidding process internally to hone up bidding skills (10). Applying for external funding was essential in some library services (19) as “The mainline budget is fully stretched just trying to keep the day-to-day service going ...” (8). Writing bids tended to be the responsibility of senior management (8, 12); one manager described the process as “trial and error” (12). Another emphasised using the right terminology: “... they are very keen on ‘transferable benefits’ and you have to demonstrate that your work has got the sort of benefit that they want”. Above all it was important to



remember that "what their needs are and what our needs are might not be the same ..." (5, 15), hence it could be necessary to "repackage" a research project to tap into external funding (6).

As well as the lack of knowledge about funding sources (no staff had received any training) three managers spoke about the local authority's reluctance to apply for external funds (3, 6, 10) and another manager spoke of the perceived difficulty in bidding for European funds in comparison to applying to the British Library (11). One explanation for this apparent lack of interest in applying for external funding could be that funding did not match the most pressing needs (5). For another manager it was not that a failure to obtain funds was disheartening but rather that it had been a waste of time (19). Others worried that matching the criteria of the funding body could skew service (2, 11).

The budget available to support research activity varied greatly between authorities. Only one manager had a defined budget of about £13,000 (10). Another library service had fully devolved budgeting so there were opportunities to "fit in" research activities (17). Two library services had no budget (11, 13), another had no allowance for "any kind of research activity that's costed as such" (15). Others (6, 7) were prepared to be adaptable, although this would involve making choices. Not surprisingly there was a concern with getting value for money. One manager compared the cost of his time to research something against the cost of carrying out a survey:

... that survey cost us just over £400 to get the analysis, which was good value for money ... And that's the issue, if it costs £2,000 for me to research the things I'm interested in that would get us five surveys analysed ... It's a drop in the ocean in the overall budget of £1.4 million but our budget is so inflexible these days we don't even have that sort of option (18).

Despite not having any budget several library services were still able to conduct research as long as costs could be hidden or absorbed, for example, survey work was funded by the publicity and promotions budget (1), the printing budget (11) or generally absorbed (9, 12, 16, 18). The real problem were the implications for staff time (7, 9, 12, 13, 19), although even this could be minimised: "as far as the management team goes the cost would have been minimal as everybody tended to do the work outside of work time ..." (9).

It is all very well managers saying "we are very good at getting things done on the cheap!" (17) but the lack of a dedicated budget for research activity can have other implications for the research process. As well as acting as a deterrent (13), research may also become outcome-driven (10), and there are clearly problems with staffing and ensuring continuity of staffing, especially given a background of budget cuts (19). One manager noted that "resources for training are limited" so there was a tendency to rely on the limited internal expertise (14). Another spoke about the effect of funding research on staff morale: "you can get a poor reaction from staff ... because it's taking up five grand that we could use for the service" (16). Limits on funding could also be responsible for limits in methodology. One manager pointed out "any kind of collection and analysis of data is very expensive so the whole thing has been designed to be incredibly simple to do" (11). Hence methodologies were chosen which were "the most cost-effective option" with the result that "it was a very simple survey ... we did all the analysis ourselves" (11).

### **Who is involved in doing research within library services?**

The responsibility for carrying out much of the research activity fell on the chief librarian and senior staff (1, 11), some of whom had had relevant experience (14, 18), but more often than not this was not the case, and obviously such staff have other major responsibilities. Sometimes volunteers from library staff were used (1, 11, 18), especially if they were studying for professional qualifications (9, 11, 17) or staff were invited to apply for specific projects (6, 10, 17). Some research activities were achieved through delegation or secondment. One manager described how:

... it is increasingly difficult to offer staff opportunities for promotion ... people will use project funding for an opportunity to either move sideways into something that enables them to develop, or indeed something which will replace promotion in terms of financial benefits as well as career benefits (8).

Specialist or dedicated research staff were few and far between (19). While they may be recruited for externally funded programmes (12), it was equally likely that these would be seen as opportunities for existing staff (12, 16). A minority of managers had ready access



to staff with research skills within their wider departments (10, 14), although these staff in themselves were not always trained specialists (5). While one manager pointed out how the reduction in numbers of professional staff over the years had reduced the potential research capacity (2), reductions in staff with specific research responsibilities were noted by four authorities, (10, 15, 16, 17) including the loss of a planning and development officer in 1991 (15) and a departmental research officer in 1993 (17). However, three new posts were also mentioned which offered some degree of research capacity, usually within a wider marketing or development role (10, 16, 18).

Very few managers thought of themselves as practitioner-researchers, indeed one simply described himself as "a happy amateur who is dabbling really" (11), there can be no doubt, given the degree to which research activity is combined with day-to-day work, that many senior library staff could fall into such a category. One manager described how the situation had evolved:

In the past we were more able to second staff to projects but now the staffing budget is so tight that that is just not as possible. What we tend to do is to expect the higher paid staff to take on the research function ... It's put into their job description now when we are setting up posts. It may not be described as research as such, probably policy development (20).

On the whole any research training was gained at degree level or acquired through experience (3, 7, 9, 12), or previous posts (5, 16), or through personal interest (6, 8), rather than formal expertise. Or, alternatively, relying on a key person (1, 10, 13): in one case this was simply "a colleague's husband (who) is an economist ..." (13). One manager summed up the situation as "skills development by osmosis" (17). Another added "we are amateurs at (research). Our skills lie in other directions which are concerned with providing services to the public" (19).

Using consultants then was a necessity where library services did not have the expertise to prepare questionnaires, or the computer resources to analyse results (12), or where it was inappropriate "to use people from another department" as "they would not understand what we were about" (15). There were also advantages, namely objectivity and credibility (1). Cost, of course, was prohibitive, and the use of consultants was reserved

for major projects, "Lottery bids and that kind of thing", in one local authority (5), not for the library service. Furthermore, there was the question of value for money and two managers reported poor experiences with consultants (13, 20).

### **Who else may be involved?**

There are staff external to the library service who may be involved in public library research activities, for example those in a corporate research unit. On the whole, at the level in the hierarchy of the managers interviewed, surprisingly few knew whether or not their local authority had a corporate research unit. Arrangements varied greatly between local authorities. One manager from a large county authority said there was "no central policy unit at all" (15) although he could get raw data from a Planning and Transportation Department (15). Similarly (12) used the Planning Department and (20) the Planning and Marketing Unit. In (5, 6 and 16) the managers could make a bid to the Corporate Information Unit to undertake research. The new unitary authorities each had access, on a commissioning basis, to a Joint Strategy Unit which had previously been the county's Research and Investigation Unit (5, 9, 14, 18) although there was some doubt as for how long this arrangement would continue.

Some managers utilised the expertise within the Chief Executive's Department in terms of "policy and planning people" (6, 11) or "performance and monitoring" (13). The level of assistance varied, while advice was readily available (10) staffing was not (19). Economic Development was mentioned by some managers (7, 17, 19), particularly as a source of advice on bidding to Europe (12). Four managers (6, 10, 17, 18) had access to research skills within the wider Department in which "Libraries" was based. This could vary from an individual (10) to a team (6, 17). Other contacts were ad hoc.

During the discussions the library managers were prompted to give examples of how library services had worked with different departments within their local authorities. For example, four managers described joint projects with Education, namely a poets in residence scheme (5), an assessment of services for schools (5, 7), developing parent information points in libraries (15) and introducing a child care information service (20). In



practice working closely with other sections of the local authority tended to occur intermittently or “at the sharp end” (11): “... we would tend to involve other departments as and when we thought they would be useful to us and vice versa ...” (12).

Another manager felt that, regarding cross-departmental working, while there was “a lot more than in the past” there was “not as much as there should be” as “people are still jealous of their areas, of what were traditionally their empires ...” (15). Only one manager spoke confidently of the success of his “interdisciplinary approach” (7). Another admitted “there is a wish to work corporately in the department, in the county, but there is a lack of resources to carry that out in a very thorough way” (12). On a more positive note one manager worked in a local authority where:

... there is a commitment to break down departmental barriers – we have done away with departments now, we have clusters, and I think the Council is trying to encourage groups to look at things more strategically and to think of the wider picture not just their own bit (19).

### **What is public library research used for?**

Action usually followed the results of research activities. Sometimes findings from consultation were used to inform a library service’s strategy (19), as well as developing services (9, 11). Sometimes, but not often, there was follow-up research to confirm findings, for example, action research after a weekend opening survey (11, 19). Much research formed the basis of Committee reports (3, 10, 11).

Identifying whether research had been used for developing policy and/or for developing service was not always straightforward because the managers themselves could not always unravel what could be a complex situation: “... although policy is supposed to come before service development, they often come together and often service developments lead you to adjust the policy ...” (12). Because research is undertaken to inform management and ultimately Committee decision-making it does impact on service development but this does tend to be small scale, for example, introducing new services such as videos (15) or a homework centre (19). Several library services extended or changed their opening hours (1, 10, 11, 13,

15). Others improved services by following up user comments (5, 9, 10, 13, 16).

Research seems to have little impact on broader policy considerations. This is not surprising given the nature of the research and the fact that it did tend to be more relevant to service than policy, and hence it was easier to discern the impact on service rather than policy (16, 17). Only one manager, in a new unitary authority was clearly expecting research to influence policy: “... the driving force behind our research is to know our business ... we’re really starting from scratch and the operational issues will come later” (18). While another manager maintained “the results of the research programme can, should, and do, lead to specific programmes of action that can also influence changes in culture and policy” (10), another was more wary: “I don’t think the research has led us to modify the overall purpose of the policy or the aims, but I think it has reinforced those” (12).

Specific examples of the impact of research on policy were limited in scope and number. One manager noted “we can identify customer concerns through user profiling activity ... that can lead to changes in policy and direct action” and gave an example of the provision of women-only desks (10). Others spoke about changes to book buying/selection procedures (5, 9). Three other managers (16, 17) gave examples of how research findings led to service developments which were subsequently used to influence policy, for example, regarding the impact of introducing services for blind people, via a research project. This manager reflected:

I guess that [project] helped the council to put some substance to the fine words of equal opportunities. It’s not so much that we came up with a radical new policy but that the work enabled us to clarify and substantiate policy with actions ... in a public library context you simply cannot engage in pure research, any research that we do always has to be done on the basis that we can sustain it in the real world with a real service development ... (8).

One problem in using research findings to influence and shape policy was that “we’ve never set up a piece of work to say we want to look at this in policy terms” (11). The complexity of policy development was clearly an issue. One manager described the lengthy process of “informed debate and discussion” combined with the “intuitive element” regarding policy development in his local authority and concluded that “policy in part is



formed by service research findings but also by intuition" (7). Another felt that "policy development is more difficult to get a handle on" (11), for example:

Policy is driven by lots of things and research is just a small trickle ... the direction of the council, the amount of funding ... professional developments ... central government messages as well ... So this piece of research ... is quite a small voice against a much larger voice (11).

While managers found it hard to talk about the impact of research on policy there was a greater awareness of the added value of research. Often staff involved in projects retained a lot of expertise (16). However the main benefit of research was that it provided accountability: "I think the more information you have got the more power you have got in terms of justifying the library service" (5). Research findings were "... incredibly useful politically ..." (11). One manager said "we are looking for research ... that provides information that can be used as a political tool ..." (17). Yet another valued research "for producing committee reports, it helps with getting the message across when there are threats of budget cuts ..." (10). Library managers described how research verified actions by being able to get away from the "anecdotal" and "challenge a lot of givens" (5, 18), giving them "genuine findings" to take to the politicians instead of working "very much on hunches" (13), and to be able to demonstrate the mass they are working with:

(When) the councillors have said "the last thing we want to do is shut a library" ... that was not because they were swayed by my eloquent prose but because they're aware that ... that information has come from our research ... (with) their voters (17).

As well as providing useful results one manager noted the value of raising the library service's profile in that "... there is a certain amount of kudos in doing it" (11). Involvement in larger bids, even if they are not successful, often paved the way for smaller successful bids (19) and raised the stature of the library service within the local authority:

Another consequence of the work we have been doing is that we're now leading the production of the council's Intranet and ... we've got a place on the council's information strategy group. A few years ago that wouldn't have been the case ... (19).

Another described the benefits of leading the authority's Gateway to Information project:

The project certainly raised our profile and we are very keen to maintain control of it ... and

actually make other officers better aware of the kind of services we provide. We're pushing the fact that we are not just about romances for little old ladies, we are actually about providing information ... it makes us less expendable in the budget cuts ... (9).

The defining feature of research in the public library context is that much of it is conducted to inform committee decision-making. The influence of the members is all-encompassing. Political circumstances varied between local authorities as did members' interest in library services. There is an expectation that research should be present in committee reports but some managers (7, 8, 15) felt that whilst members expected to be informed they were not necessarily research-oriented:

Research is not a word that I use with elected members ... I would always use the word development ... elected members of the authority would not regard research as something that we could afford to do ... For me research is an element of service development, but the connotation for most elected members would be that it's something that academics do (8).

The degree to which research findings were used by the members was also questioned (12). Some managers spoke of members' stubbornness in refusing to accept valid research findings (1, 13, 18). Another bemoaned their limited regional rather than national views (3). One manager touched on the difficulty of reconciling research carried out through focus groups, and members views:

... elected members are voted in to represent local people ... whatever focus group you put together lacks authority to speak on behalf of the public at large (8).

Another manager felt that the impact that research could have was inevitably limited because "at the end of the day, many decisions, particularly in relation to budget, are political decisions and whilst we can advise and prepare the facts they aren't always taken on board" (2). One consequence of this is that one needs a strategy in using research findings to influence policy decisions, thus, "it tends to be not one killing blow, but it's making a lot of opportunities to drip-feed the information to them" (17).

## Difficult issues

The interviews highlighted some serious problems for managers, such as sparing staff time for research (17) or "quite simply, it's

finding the time to do it" (4). Even where staff were funded there were still dilemmas in covering secondments and supporting external research staff (20). Library managers lacked "time to plan and manage research" (12, 3), time to allocate and supervise staff (12, 17), time to ensure the work is used (17) and that results are accurate and valid (3). The timescales involved in bidding caused great difficulties (2, 15, 19). Eight different funding agencies were mentioned during the interviews, each of which had different requirements for applications. Some managers lamented the bureaucracy and paperwork (7, 8, 20) and the need to cover matching costs (10) or hidden costs (15), all of which increased if the bid was successful.

Library managers were clearly aware of differing agendas (15, 19) of the local authority and potential funders. One manager described the "tension in trying to do research which will support you in doing what you want to do ... but at the same time not being confrontational from the money (16). The prevailing local authority context could also be a limiting factor. Some were keen in principle to work with other local authorities but found collective activity difficult "because there is a different political agenda in every authority" (15).

The approach to methodology by most managers was succinctly expressed by "keep it simple, stupid": "We are not looking to break new ground. We want information and we want it collected in a robust, testable, way, so we try and do it as simply and straightforwardly as possible ..." (17). The research methods used ranged from the straightforward, for example, "our annual user survey only asks six questions, we make no analysis of the users by age, sex, whatever" (11); to the more innovative:

Working alongside (an arts group) has shown me the role arts can play in consultation, because it's not just about getting people to say what they like, it focuses their attention, challenges their perceptions, and gets them involved in a very direct way (19).

On the whole the methods were drawn from standard practice including, for example, action research surveys, unobtrusive testing. Some managers apologised for their simplicity (3, 5, 16, 19). Others used a range of methodologies because they thought it was good practice (10, 14, 19) or to stretch the budget (10, 12), but there was little sense of there

being any evaluation of methods used to obtain data.

Regarding dissemination: "If there wasn't a need to write it up you would just leave it at that. You need to write it up if you have to justify resources or to get a decision out of somebody else. We haven't got time to write things up for the sake of it" (12). As well as losing research through not writing up projects there was also a loss through the failure to share findings and make best use of results internally within the authority (3, 16).

Some managers questioned the relevance to local people of public library research (7, 8, 14, 16, 17), for example, the value of local versus national networking projects (20). Even where a research approach was favoured managers were conscious of the pitfalls including bias (2, 3), researching the right issues (3, 18), "being blown off course by both a lack of time and finance" (12), communication and co-ordination with other staff (3) and maintaining projects (2, 3). Time and time again the bottom-line was emphasised: "The book fund has been cut by 41 per cent in five years. In that context it takes a lot to say 'I want to invest in research activity' when I can't put books on shelves..." (15).

The findings reinforce earlier perceptions and conclusions about public library research activities as reported in the professional literature (Goulding, 1994). Despite positive changes in direction, such as the consultative work in developing a national agenda on public library research, and the promise of practical support for public library research at the time of the interviews there was not a strong positive impact on research activities at local level and it is evident that the research capacity within the public library sector remains underdeveloped. To ensure survival, growth and the realisation of its strategic potential, the public library service has not only to contribute to policy objectives but to engage with policy development. The new government has proposed a vision of the future and the profession has been quick to demonstrate how libraries can help achieve this vision by showing how they can make a real contribution to education, economic regeneration, cultural enrichment and community development. At the local level public libraries have the potential to help their local authorities achieve their social, economic and political objectives. The surfacing of a more coherent and driven approach means



that research can no longer be confined to "simpler" issues to do with operational service development, but must extend to "deeper" research addressing the impact of services. This means that public library services operating today need access to researchers with skills in quantitative and qualitative methods as well as a sound knowledge of social and policy analysis, market research, community development and customer care. It is proposed that the future development of research in the public library service requires the role of research to be reassessed, the rationale restated, the contribution in transforming information into intelligence recognised, and the approach to methodology reviewed to tackle the wicked issues. One contribution of the thesis will be to provide a clear understanding of the limitations in current practice and to put forward recommendations for action to ensure that public library services are not excluded or disadvantaged in the research stakes.

## Note

- 1 In order to make best use of the available data, and ensure trustworthiness of the findings, the transcripts of the interviews were analysed using three different techniques. Initial data analysis was carried out by coding down to produce a matrix reviewing each manager's comments across nine categories derived from the interview schedule. Such findings are inevitably superficial as the summary is derived from the interview schedule. Scanning the matrix revealed tensions, such as the great differences in the approach to research management taken by the different authorities, and also inconsistencies in what individ-

ual managers were saying. This presence of a number of minority views, and the apparent lack of definite answers, made the data amenable to dilemma analysis in order to consider these tensions in more depth. These analytical techniques are discussed in a forthcoming article in *Library and Information News*. The findings reported in this article were derived by intensive analysis carried out using the constant comparative method. Comments are attributed to individuals by means of parentheses, however to maintain confidentiality no key is provided within this article.

## References

- Goodall, D.L. (1996), "'It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it': a review of public library research with special reference to methodology", *Public Library Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 69-76.
- Goodall, D.L. (1997), "Public library research methods: some observations based on an examination of 41 final reports of Public Library Development Incentive Scheme Projects", *Library and Information Research News*, Vol. 21 No. 68, pp. 25-32.
- Goulding, A. (1994), "Public library research – its future organisation and funding", *Public Library Journal*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 75-7.
- Library and Information Commission Research Committee (1997), *Prospects: a Strategy for Action: Library and Information Research, Development and Innovation: Proposals for Consultation*, Library and Information Commission, London.
- Pluse, J.M. and Prytherch, R. (1996), *Research in Public Libraries*, BLRIC, London.
- Society of Chief Librarians Public Libraries Research Group (1997), *Strategic Research Issues for Public Libraries*, Essex County Council/Society of Chief Librarians Public Libraries Research Group.
- Stewart, J. (1994), *Issues for the Management of Local Government*, Institute of Local Government Studies, Birmingham.